

# African Studies in East-Central Europe

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## Introduction

To clarify, the term Central and Eastern Europe, for the purposes of this essay, is understood as the four countries of the so-called 'Visegrád Group', namely Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. The former German Democratic Republic, which turned into six eastern *Bundesländer* (German federal states) after the end of communist rule, could also be included in this designation. African Studies in these countries has no official colonial background. Polish African Studies is the largest with regards to the number of practitioners and its historical depth. Czech African Studies may be able to showcase the traveller and collector Emil Holub (1847-1902), but as an academic discipline emerged only in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hungarian research on Africa also has old roots. African Studies in Slovakia emerged only after the first group of students received their diplomas from Charles University in Prague. The purpose of this paper is not to reconstruct history or give a list of protagonists but, rather, to sketch the contribution of East-Central Europeans to African Studies during the last 50 years since the publication of two-volume *Dějiny Afriky* [A History of Africa] (Hrbek et al. 1966). I will focus mainly on Czechoslovakia because I have had first-hand experience - so to say observant participation - from building African Studies in that country.

## African Studies in Poland and Hungary

Until 1990, the early steps of African Studies in the Central European region overlapped with the communist era. In general, the study of Africa was determined by an isolationist conceptualization of 'socialist' sciences as a cluster of disciplines diametrically different from 'bourgeois' science. The development of African Studies was understood as a contribution to

the policy of support of national-liberation movements and the eventual emergence of socialist or pro-socialist regimes on the African continent (so-called “socialist orientation”). The example of Soviet African Studies was to be followed as faithfully as possible. Therefore, the protagonists of East-Central European African Studies were to be, following the Soviet example, members of the local communist parties. This was difficult to achieve, because the early development of African Studies was marked by de-Stalinisation. Poland and Hungary had their anti-communist protests in 1956, and Czechoslovakia’s Prague Spring of 1968 was strangled by a Soviet military invasion and its aftermath. Whereas in Poland and Hungary a period of what can more or less be called ‘liberalization’ followed, allowing early Africanists to attend Western academic gatherings, the Czechoslovak Africanists had to face 20 long years of obscurantist isolationism and a return to pro-Soviet lackeyism.

Polish *péripiéties* of how to reach Africa and do research there were vividly described by Maciej Kurcz (2017). It is intriguing that important Polish Africanists such as Michał Tymowski, Jacek Łapott, and Ryszard Vorbrich were recruited from the participants in student expeditions. At the end of the 1960s, purges in Poland led to a serious weakening of the discipline, as a number of scholars went into exile. The Ethiopist Stefan Strelcyn left for Britain, the Hausa language specialist Zygmunt Frajzyniegi escaped to the USA, and the couple Nina Pilszczikowa (Hausanist, student of Dmitri A. Olderogge, originally from Russia) and Szymon Chodak (political scientist and author of the monographs *Systemy polityczne “czarnej” Afriki* [Political systems of ‘black’ Africa] and *Kaplani, czarownicy, wiedźmi* [Kaplani, sorcerers, witches]) joined Canadian departments, while Rajmund Ohly (Bantuist) found refuge in Namibia. On the other hand, Michał Tymowski, a disciple of Marian Małowist, author of the untranslated monograph *Wielkie państwa Sudan Zachodniego w późnym średniowieczu* [The great states of the Western Sudan in the late Middle Ages], was active in Warsaw’s *Studium afrykanistyczne* [African Studies] and its periodical *Africana Bulletin*; he also published an important article in the French historical review *Annales* (Tymowski 1970). This brought him into the group of specialists working on early states. In the 1970s and 1980s, Tymowski participated in several conferences and their resulting publications. His work reached its peak with the monograph *The Origins and Structures of Political Institutions in Pre-colonial Black Africa* (2009) and *Europejczyci i Afrykanie* (2017). Andrzej Waliński (1908-1974), an anthropologist and linguist who studied with

Bronisław Malinowski in London during the 1930s worked in Kraków. After the war, he went to Kenya, and his two-year field research was published in Polish (Waligórski 1969). The sociologist Andrzej Zajączkowski (1922-1994) lectured in Ghana and Uganda during the Polish communist rule and his book *Muntu dzisiaj: studium afrykanistyczne* [Muntu today: an Africanist study] is used till today as a university textbook. He also published an anthology of Polish 'sociologizing' African Studies (Zajączkowski 1980).

More recently, Polish African Studies were described by three Wrocław younger authors (Czernichowski, Kopiński, and Polus 2012) who perhaps 'forgot' about Waligórski, Zajączkowski, and Chodak, but underlined the work of physical anthropologist Jan Czekanowski (1882-1965) who participated in the expedition of the Duke of Mecklenburg to East Africa (Czekanowski 2001). These authors also mention the contribution to the study of Khoisan languages by the Kraków professor Roman Stopa (1895-1995). This article is valuable as it discusses the problem of *Afrikanistik*, which, like in Germany, is understood traditionally as the study of African languages and cultures and thus is a "fully autonomous field, a discipline in its own right" (Czernichowski et al. 2012: 177). For 'core' Africanists, "Africa as a research subject is unique and... requires methodological tools tailored specifically to its non-replicable features" (ibid.). The other approach, which is preferred by the authors, considers Africa as a continent and sees African Studies, accordingly, as Area Studies, similar to Asian or European Studies (ibid.). Since 1990, Polish Africanists of both 'types' are organized in the Polish Africanist Association (PTA) which has its seat in the Department of Languages and Cultures of Africa at the University of Warsaw. This association organizes all-Polish Africanist conferences, the last of which was held in 2018. Some Polish Africanists also participate in European conferences on African Studies (ECAS), but there is no formal cooperation between the Africa-Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies (AEGIS), and the PTA.

For a discussion of Hungarian studies on Africa, there is a recent article in *Modern Africa* (Szabó 2013). But it is worth mentioning that, besides the new Africanist centre in Pécs, Hungarian Africanists were organized in the 'Council for Economic Research on Africa' during the Kádár socialist period. It is also worth pointing out that the Africanists and anthropologists Csaba Ecsedy and Mihály Sárkány gained a certain international reputation. Sárkány participated in the Hungarian Scientific Expedition to Africa in 1987-88, which traced Samuel Teleki's ex-

pedition from a hundred years earlier. Another Africanist, Géza Füssi Nagy (1946-2008), who studied Swahili in Leningrad and taught it in Hungary for his entire career, also participated in the expedition. Éva Sebestyén edited the writings of László Magyar (1818-1864), who explored and mapped south-eastern Angola and its adjacent regions for several years (Sebestyén 2009). After the fall of the Kádár communist regime, African Studies in Hungary struggled with a lack of both financial and moral support. In 1998 and 2007, two volumes of essays under the title *Africana Hungarica* were published in Hungarian. Bea Vidacs, an anthropologist, achieved international acclaim with her study of the socio-political aspects of Cameroonian football (Vidacs 2010, 2011). A comparison of Hungary and Sierra Leone was published by the field anthropologist Diána Szantó (Szantó 2016).

## African Studies in Communist Czechoslovakia

In communist Czechoslovakia, where I lived until 1976, African Studies practically began with the 'Africa Year' of 1960. The unwritten rule of preferring members of the Communist party meant that the head workers such as Ivan Hrbek and Josef Muzikář were members, while the 'aspirants' in the Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and the Faculty of Philosophy at Charles University were not. The 'key' of being a member of the party played a role in being allowed to participate in international seminars, conferences, and study sojourns, but that was not all: Indirectly, the 'key' was applied to the allocation of stipends for the students of African Studies in the Soviet Union. I was one of them, along with Zdeněk Poláček. Both our parents were members of the Communist party. Two other students in Leningrad were Slovaks, Andrej Gorol and Jozef Dobrota. Gorol was sent to study in the Soviet Union and, after graduating, joined the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Dobrota joined the party while studying. The party committee considered inviting me into the party and sent Dobrota to tell me the news. I told him that I did not show any interest, pointing out Stalinist hecatombs. I was never asked again to join the communists!

As a student, I participated in the 1st Conference of Africanists of the Socialist Countries in Moscow in April 1966. I was surprised that Czechoslovak Africanists were represented by the Arabist Josef Muzikář and not Hrbek, my Prague teacher of African history and, by far, the most important Africanist in the Oriental Institute. As Muzikář's con-

tribution was full of inadequacies, he agreed that we publish an article in co-authorship (Muzikarzh and Skalnik 1967). I also remember that some other adepts of African Studies arrived for shorter stays in Lenin-grad. They were mostly non-party members (Otakar Hulec, Milan Kalous, Vlastimil Fiala). Party members were sent to conferences in other 'socialist' countries, African countries, and sometimes even to the West. The 1st International Conference of Africanists, held in Accra in 1962, was attended by Olga Skalníková as official delegate, while Hrbek and Petr Zima were also present. Zima was not a member of the Communist party and taught at Legon at the time.

An exception to the rule was Ladislav Holý's field research in the Sudan, taking several months and financed by the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. Holý was no party member. While Holý was in the Darfur province in the Sudan, among the Berti, Olga Skalníková carried out urban research in the Conakry's Boulbinet (Skalníková 1964). Holý attended a conference of the International African Institute (IAI) in Nigeria and, thanks to a sponsorship by the IAI, could continue his research in Darfur in 1965 (Holý 1967, 1974). In those liberalizing years, the Swahili K. F. Růčička could visit Ghana, Hulec visited Tanzania and Zambia, and Z. Malý visited East Africa. All of these were non-party members working in the Oriental Institute. Jiřina Svobodová, a non-party member in the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, was sponsored for field research in the east of Senegal (Svobodová 1981). The twelve students of African Studies who studied in the years 1961-1966 did not visit Africa during their studies, but one of them, Viera Pawliková, could continue her studies at Makerere University College in Uganda, while Magdalena Slavíková left for Kenya to carry out a linguistic study while registered for a DPhil at London's School of Oriental and African Studies. Ladislav Venyš spent two years studying African politics at Syracuse University, USA. Zdeněk Poláček managed to visit Ethiopia in 1968 at the invitation of his future father-in-law. Holý and Kalous were appointed to positions in Zambia and Sierra Leone respectively. Finally, Elena Zúbková Bertoncini, specialising in Swahili, married and moved to Italy, and worked subsequently as professor of Swahili language and literature in the Istituto Orientale in Naples.

The Soviet invasion of 1968 profoundly shook the Czechoslovak Africanist scene. While Pawliková and Venyš returned, Holý, Kalous, and Slavíková remained abroad, where they built impressive careers. The ominous year 1968 with its hopes and bitter disappointment touched

Czechoslovak Africanists very negatively. Communist ‘normalization’ almost destroyed the career of Hrbek. He surrendered his party ticket in protest against the Soviet invasion, and as a result, his participation in the editorial board of the UNESCO *General History of Africa* was suspended. Only after the personal intervention of the Secretary-General of UNESCO, Amadou M’Bow, who appealed to the Czech communist president, could Hrbek continue his very important work that made him famous in Czechoslovak African Studies.

Otherwise, travels abroad were permitted only to ‘brotherly’ countries. I travelled abroad officially for the first time in 1975, when I was employed by Comenius University at Bratislava. I went to Leipzig to attend the conference on Diedrich Westermann from the viewpoint of Marxist-Leninist African Studies. Leipzig was to be a venue for unofficial friendly get-togethers between Zima and Siegmund Brauner. There were no business trips to the capitalist West. In 1973, I was allowed to travel to the USA to attend the World Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, but that was a private visit made possible by an exchange of US dollars arranged through a Slovak colleague whose nephew worked at the state bank in Prague. I could go again to the West in 1975, through the same banker. This time, it was to visit ethnological museums in the Netherlands, France, Germany, and Denmark, but I also attended a meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology held in Amsterdam. But once I was not politically screened in a “complex evaluation” and almost simultaneously obtained a six-month research fellowship in the Netherlands, I did not hesitate and forestalled an eventual dismissal by escaping to the Netherlands, where, in cooperation with Henri Claessen, I completed work on the international collective monograph, *The Early State* (Claessen and Skalník 1978). My affiliation in this volume was put as “formerly Comenius University, Bratislava, Czechoslovakia.”

In the following years, my career took place at the University of Leiden and the University of Cape Town. When I returned to Czechoslovakia in 1990 and was rehabilitated, I became a local Africanist in the Institute of Near East and Africa and India at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University. In the years from 1992-1996, I worked as Ambassador of former Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic to Lebanon. In 2001-2002, I was a Fellow of the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), where I worked on my Ghana research data. In 2012, I was a Guest Lecturer at the Institute of African Studies, University of Bayreuth.

I did not mention Luboš Kropáček, an Arabist specializing in Swahili and African history, who was not a party member but used to travel to the West and Africa or the Arab world throughout communist rule because he was a collaborator with the state security service. Thus, he was in contact with foreign colleagues and could purchase the newest foreign literature (Zikmund et al. 2013: 88-93). After the Soviet invasion, purges took place in the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and Charles University, and members of the Communist party of Czechoslovakia got jobs as lecturers and researchers. They were sent to Africa and even to the West. Marie Brzobohatá went to Ghana, Josef Poláček to the USSR. Hulec and Zima had to leave the Oriental Institute and only V. Klíma stayed. But he had to wait for his first trip to Nigeria until 1989, just on the eve of the fall of communism. However, Josef Kandert, who was not a party member, still could go to Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and other countries, because he was a museologist and as such belonged to the Ministry of Culture, at least in terms of administration. He published a study of Nigerian ceramics and a book on the society of South Africa in the time of Holub's travels there (Kandert 1974, 1997). I should also mention Karel Lacina, the main Africanist of the 'normalization' period. He was an active party member, the head of the African department at the Oriental Institute and also the central Communist party apparatus for years. He frequented conferences in 'socialist' countries, states in the USSR, and visited some of the African countries of alleged socialist orientation, such as Ethiopia.

As far as Czech and Slovak African Studies during communist rule are concerned, no internationally recognized contributions except those by Hrbek can be mentioned. Holý left for Zambia in 1968, where he was the director of the Livingstone Museum, but he remained abroad and eventually became a British anthropologist and Africanist. When he visited Czechoslovakia shortly before the demise of communist rule, his professional interest turned to post-communist changes in the Czech Republic. He did not contribute to African Studies anymore.

## **After 1989**

From the 1990s, further developments in African Studies came almost to a complete standstill. On the one hand, there were more contacts between Africa and the West. There was a conference comparing democracy in South Africa and the Czech Republic, and we celebrated 40 years of



African Studies at Charles University (Kropáček and Skalník 2001). But soon afterwards, the teaching of African languages and history had to be suspended for lack of qualified personnel (Kropáček 2017). A certain revival came with the organization of the international conferences *Viva Africa* (since 2007) and the establishing of a Master of African Politics at the University of Hradec Králové.

The *Viva Africa* conference, now held biannually, enabled more contacts among Central European Africanists and also led to the publication of several volumes by the LIT Verlag. Central European Africanists increasingly attend European conferences on African Studies (ECAS) and appear on other European and global forums of African Studies. Because Central European African Studies has not been burdened by colonial ballast, its contribution to the production of knowledge on Africa has become increasingly recognized (Skalník 2016). The Czech Association for African Studies, founded in 2013, is an associate member of AEGIS. The journal *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society*, published by the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Hradec Králové since 2013, has become a recognized periodical.

## **African Studies at the University of Hradec Králové**

When the decision was to be made as to what kind of African Studies to start at Hradec Králové, the dilemma was whether Africa should be studied as a whole, or rather not to study 'Africa' but certain details within Africa. We were aware of the fact that Africa is no longer a continent of 'traditional' culture, but, rather, that profound changes have taken place in Africa both during the colonial and the independent periods (urbanization, education, travel, medical care, globalization, social media, internet, etc.). It was obvious that these changes can only be captured by interdisciplinary approaches. As politics appears to be the key to understanding modern Africa, it was decided to launch a Master program in African politics. At Hradec Králové, choosing this approach was made easier because there is no tradition of teaching African languages, literature, and what can be broadly called 'culture.' Thus, the scope of African Studies was defined more narrowly to what was affordable, but with the conviction that individual (sub-)disciplines produce deeper knowledge, while a complex understanding is becoming ever more difficult, while trying to see 'the whole' prevents noticing and understanding the small details. The 'holistic' approach appeared impossible at Hradec, as was



‘traditional’ *Afrikanistik*. Thus, establishing African Studies which are limited in scope, while also being more specialized, became inevitable. This was also in accordance with developments elsewhere. This type of specialization in an already limited African Studies became a necessity within the Czech educational system as part of the Bologna system. A five-year Master program would be not affordable and would also suffer from a too small number of students. A two-year Master program means only one and a half years of actual instruction.

Conceptually, the program relies on politics as the foundation for a further specialized study of linguistics, history, art, sociology, anthropology, geography, or economy. It was also necessary to resolve the dilemma of geographical concentration: Either limit the scope to one state and misunderstand the continent, or concentrate on the continent and ignore the details? The emphasis on student exchanges with African universities (Ghana, Nigeria, Cape Verde, Kenya, South Africa, and Rwanda; further exchange programs with Sierra Leone, Tanzania, and Zambia are currently being prepared) has helped to resolve this dilemma. The movements of students in both directions are all financed by the University of Hradec Králové. Mobility with the University of Ghana is part of ERASMUS+. The main problem lies in the lack of knowledge about the Czech Republic and the resulting lack of interest in student mobility from Africa. Staff academic mobilities have also led to deeper studies of the particular countries visited. Of special interest here is Ghana. There is also mobility to Dalarna in Sweden. The main topics of research are Islam in Africa, South Africa, conflicts in Africa, and political development in Ghana. Thus far, staff mobility to other universities in Europe is limited.

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## Appendix

### Structure of the MA program

#### 1st year

- Political anthropology
- Geopolitics of selected regions
- Political history of Africa 1
- Non-democratic regimes and theory of transition
- Political systems of African countries
- Comparative politics
- French 1, 2

#### 2nd year

- Political history of Africa 2
- Sources of political instability in Africa
- Africa in international relations
- Electoral and party systems
- Modernization and political transformation
- Conflict resolution
- French 3

There are also several mandatory subjects from which students have to choose:

- History of insurgent movements
- Diplomacy in practice
- Ethnicity and regionalism in Ghana
- Strategy of development in Africa
- Arabic
- Portuguese

While the MA program in African politics was started in 2007, the PhD program in African Studies only followed some years later. Enrolment in the PhD program is limited to a few students only, but the students can choose the language of instruction (Czech or English). It is possible to

do internships at the Czech embassies in Africa (Morocco, Ghana, and Nigeria).

The academic staff (including retired members) engaged in Africanist Research at FF UHK

- Vlastimil Fiala: political parties in Africa, theory of partisanship
- Jan Klíma: history of Lusophone Africa
- Jan Prouza: politics in Ghana, theory
- Petr Skalník: chieftaincy and state in Africa
- PhD students: Various topics

### **Publications**

**Vlastimil Fiala:** monographs on African political partisanship by country (thus far)

- São Tomé e Príncipe, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Madagascar, Comores, Mauritius, Seychelles, Angola, Djibouti, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, Namibia, Lesotho, Swaziland, Senegal, Gambia, Benin.
- In cooperation with other authors: Zambia, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Botswana, Malawi, Ghana, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Congo.
- Theoretical works on the study of political parties in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania.

### **Jan Klíma:**

- History of Africa: development of the continent, regions and states (Klíma 2012).
- Monographic history of states: Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, São Tomé e Príncipe, Namibia, Guinea Bissau.
- Country monographs: Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, Cape Verde, São Tomé e Príncipe. Books on the Sokols of Cape Verde, on German colonial empire, last colonial war.

**Jan Prouza:** *Ghana: Elections, political parties, partisanship* (2010).

### **Petr Skalník** (in English and Czech)

- Chapters and articles on early Voltaic states, chiefdom of Nanun, political culture in Africa, concept of the state, theories of ethnos in South Africa and USSR, tribe, modern state of Ghana, democracy in

Africa, comparisons: Ghana and Czechoslovakia, South Africa and Czechoslovakia, local wars in Africa, obituaries.

Other Africanist activities at the Department of Politics, University of Hradec Králové

- The journal *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society*. Since 2013 published by the faculty of Philosophy, University of Hradec Králové. Double-blind peer-reviewed, open-access, printed and e-versions, bi-annual, three -five studies per issue, obituaries (Mazrui, Ranger, Goody, Harries, Balandier, Vansina, Lombard, Héritier), reports on conferences, book reviews. Open to all but seeks to publish African and East-Central European authors.
- International conferences on African Studies „Viva Africa“, since 2006 in Plzeň (Pilsen), 2009-2017 organized by University of Hradec Králové and Metropolitan University Prague, in cooperation with Czech Association for African Studies. 11th Viva Africa will take place in 2019 in Olomouc. Participants from Europe (East and West), Africa. Collective monographs published by LIT Verlag in 2010, 2011, 2013, 2016.
- Recently published collective monograph in Czech, Slovak, and English: *Afrikanistika v českých zemích a na Slovensku po roce 1960: kritické ohlédnutí* [African Studies in the Czech Lands and in Slovakia after 1960: A Critical Hindsight] (Skalník a kolektiv 2017), 19 authors (studies, reminiscences, centres). Bibliography of Czech and Slovak African Studies 1960-2016.